

Posted by u/Eruwenn Aww Crap, KEEP GOING 2 years ago



Melody of the Heart

OC

I remember shifting irritably in the Human-provided chair while I waited. Though the Klorb didn't have issues with the seating, my tail and the Okijeh's wings were hampered by the 'supportive' back we were trying not to press our bodies against.

The door to the room abruptly burst open with an echo that spoke of the wonderful acoustics in the room. The Human – chosen at random out of many who volunteered – entered, carrying two backless stools and an oddly shaped case. With a flurry of apologies he offered the Okijeh and I the simple seating to rest upon before claiming his own space across from us.

Opening the case, he gently removed something he called a violin, and began plucking at the strings of his instrument. As he tuned the sourness of the notes into something more pleasing, I confess I held no particular hope for the exercise that was to come. It was a mere formality, an exploration into a newcomer's culture that all went through after having managed to contact other spacefaring races. Music was almost invariably bolstered with lyrics, and words always seemed to lose an intangible element of meaning in translation.

Even so, I started the customary recording. A formality is a formality, and there was no sense making the newcomers feel like we weren't taking them seriously.

As the Human prepared for his performance, the Klorb began the usual line of inquiry. What relationship did the Human before us have with his craft? How did he feel while he played? What was the nature of the instrument?

I, having heard this many times before, didn't pay too much attention to the answers the Human gave, up until the Klorb asked him to list the styles of music he played. The answer was a far longer list than we would normally see, though he did admit that he did have a preference for some over others. One caught at my attention, though, and my curiosity at the presence of a novelty was such that I asked for further clarification. It was called *improvisational*, clarified as the act of creating a piece of music on the spot.

I found the notion curious, but set it aside for later, zoning out once again as the rhythm of the Klorb's questioning lapped at my mind.

The gentle brush of a wingtip against my leg jolted me back to my senses. Later, when I finally managed to remember things like courtesy, I would thank the Okijeh for alerting me to the beginning of the actual musical performance, as this was where I customarily took over the questioning.

Could this Human play a song used for celebration? He could indeed, though it was overtly simple in styling. Listening to the words he sang, I knew we'd have to look into what a 'Happy Birthday' was.

Could he play a song used for sorrow? He could manage to sing that also, though with an amused apology that he wasn't playing the correct instrument for the piece. Bagpipes, therefore, joined the list of things to learn about at a later time.

The song of a country, the song of finding a mate, the song of success: all these, and more, were simultaneously played and sung by the Human without a moment's hesitation.

And then – oh, then – I made a beautiful error.

Something, perhaps nothing more than a stray particle of dust, caught in my throat. I meant to ask if he could play a lively piece of music.

Instead, all that emerged was, 'Can you play a life?'

I cleared my throat and was about to correct my query when I saw the look in the Human's eyes. They sparkled with determination, and the beginnings of a plan. It was not the face of a being who had been asked an impossibility, and I held my tongue.

I still didn't hope for much. Lyrics were so hard to translate...

With a deep breath, he briefly inclined his head to us – a nod – and began playing.

It sounded nothing like anything we had heard previously. The sounds were atonal, almost; an odd wail without rhythm. It rose and fell, repeating and picking up a beat, settling into something like a breath. Like a hiccup.

Then I spotted the different way the Human stood before us. He cradled his violin in his arms much more gently before, rocking it back and forth under the bow that sat across the strings. No, I thought with shock. The sounds he played were neither a breath, nor a hiccup. They were a cry.

The wails of a newborn.

The wailing notes he pulled from the strings slowly grew steadier, stronger. More notes were slowly added, in a halting uneasy manner that spoke of trial and error – of *learning* – and the shape of a life gradually took form. The rhythm grew sweetly wobbly, and I could almost swear I saw a child take its first steps. As the music began to truly fill the room, the three of us began to get lost in the spell the Human was weaving with his music. The notes were a fractal, kaleidoscopic reflection of ourselves, of our past. Of childhood. Of kin. Of family.

The song-child grew more definite. The sequence of notes became more certain: he had discovered a sense of self, and had a musical passage to differentiate him from others. This strain of notes, too, shifted and changed subtly as he learned more about who he was.

Through repetition, a certain firm bounce came about in the self-passage – the youth learned confidence. The solidity of the notes became a thing that stayed constant, almost jaunty, then abruptly it shifted again.

The sequence of notes that designated the song-child became longer, rising up slowly with a quick fall at the end. This new form completely overtook the old, and it was spoken with a yearning, seeking quality I couldn't quite name. It was not until a different, but compatible, sequence of notes uncertainly answered the song's query that I knew it for what it was, and as the two melodies began intertwining with one another I felt joy. The child had grown to adulthood, and had found a mate.

The happy pair swirled around one another, their togetherness expressed in the most beautiful of harmonies as the music overlapped itself. Playful and joyous tones slowly mellowed into soothing calmness, each song-born supporting the other in a way so beautiful I found myself wishing for such a thing in my own life.

I sank into the mellow melody, curling up in the couple's joy, but was shocked back to full awareness at the sudden arrhythmic zing of an unexpected note. A tense pause, then the sounds of love turned fearful, the notes quivering briskly in a way we had not yet heard. In a frantic flurry the two lovers ran off in panic as the zing of danger – of a weapon? – struck again.

They ran, and ran, doing their best to dodge the shots of their enemies. At some point, they became separated from one another, and what had once been the beautiful way they called to one another was now trembling, chaotic and terrified, shifting higher and higher in pitch as the tension grew–

That horrible destructive zing came right in the middle of her song, and she broke off into a horrible, high-pitched, screaming wail.

My scales pulled together in dread as she fell silent.

He called out to her, his song-mate, as strongly as he dared in the danger of the fray, but as his notes shook with the slow quaver of sadness, my heart did the same. He grew quiet, sorrowful, his song broken now with sobbing hiccups, with the rising wail of the wounded wilderness. The music, still carrying the occasional zing sounds of battle, slowly ceased trembling.

Where once the song-child had been strong with confidence, the song-man's strength was now fueled with rage. His tune began to ring out with a rhythm that could only be an inexorable march, his determination broken on occasion by that painful cry-wailing of defeat before digging within himself and summoning the courage to carry on.

They had killed his love. And they were going to *pay*.

He was wholeheartedly at war with them, whoever this enemy was. Again and again he struck out with chords of anger, and again and again they fell before his rage. Their death cries only seemed to fuel his fury, and the song-man seemed unstoppable. Abruptly, his music line changed; a single note, a half-step out of place. His injury caused him to falter, falling down and considering defeat before his anger pressed him onwards to slay more of those who had dared separate him from his love.

More and more often, the notes of his melody fell out of the accustomed rhythm, slowing him just a little more each time, but they were ignored. The anger within him sustained his movement, pressing him onwards and forwards until...silence.

A shuddering breath. Had he killed them all? Had he succeeded in his vengeance?

One last, hidden foe struck. He had been prepared for this and launched a counterattack. Weakly, triumph soared as his final enemy fell.

Too weakly.

The song-man collapsed to the ground, music wheezing sorrowfully with each breath. He called out to his lost love, and where once the vibrancy of life had made the call joyous, the broken melody of his dying self sounded so horribly pitiful.

He breathed, and weakly called again.

Quietly, so quietly I could barely hear it, she seemed to answer.

I held my breath, straining to hear as he coughed, wheezed, and called out again more desperately, but the same whisper-quiet tune was all that he received.

A hallucination brought on by the blood loss? An echo of an earlier, happier memory? Or, did he believe in some sort of afterlife, and this was her voice calling him to his eternal rest?

His song grew weaker, unable to do anything but reach out to the fragment of his love. Call and response. He was too far gone for harmony.

Call and response. Then, simply, the whisper-quiet response, and raspy breathing.

A heartbeat.

Weakening.

Slowing.

A single, soft note was held, slowly fading away into nothingness, and I knew then with dreadful certainty that the song-man had died.

I breathed deeply, trying to brush away signs of genuine sorrow as the silence of a finished piece swept over me. A glance to my left and right showed that I was not the only one having such a profound emotional response to the Human's playing.

We were all in a state of mourning, feeling the loss of this being that had never existed – that had been given an ephemeral life on the spur of the moment, birthed by one person's mind and hands.

We mourned, despite the Human never having sung a single word as he wove his music. It had been melody, and melody alone, that had moved us.

The recording of that session is my most prized possession, yet I cannot bear to listen to it.

My grief was far too strong the first time.